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An ideal climate for spies

"Troubles," said William Shakespeare, "come not in single spies, but in battalions" — a puzzling metaphor amid this age's multiplicity of secret agents and defectors. The Walkers, Richard Miller, Thomas Cavanagh, Sharon Scranage, Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Pollard, Larry Wu-Tai Chin, Ronald Pelton, to name only a few. Not quite up to battalion strength yet, but getting there.

In one recent period, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was adding a new name every three days to its roster of government employees and former employees accused of spying against the United States. President Reagan rejoices that our counterintelligence seems to thrive so, but even he, the most sanguine of men, has to concede that the problem is acute.

And why shouldn't it be, given the national nonchalance?

"In the past we've had some difficulty in readily admitting the intensity of this threat," Mr. Reagan was saying the other day. "Today, however, we approach the intelligence threat with a new degree of realism."

Bully idea.

May I suggest that we begin by taking espionage seriously, as opposed to treating it — in the words that Navy Secretary John Lehman was compelled to eat — as another white collar crime?

Mr. Lehman's fuse was lit by the government's plea bargain in the Walker case, which involved a Navy family, men who had taken — young Michael Walker was still taking — the king's shilling.

Deplorable, to be sure, but what of civilian government employees? Ronald Pelton worked for the Na-

tional Security Agency. Edward Howard, Karl Koecher, Sharon Scranage, and Larry Chin worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. Richard Miller worked for the FBI. And so on. All took the king's shilling, and all are accused of spying.

If a foreigner is nabbed stuffing our secrets into his diplomatic pouch, no one is astonished. Even friendly embassies maintain an espionage establishment. The problem is not the spy. The problem is corrupt American nationals whose offenses cannot be indulged if anything approaching patriotism — remember patriotism? — is to be preserved.

We are talking about spying and not treason only because we are at peace, and the U.S. Constitution defines treason as "levying war" against the United States or "giving aid and comfort" to the enemy — that alone. But spying is close enough to treason to outrage us, or ought to be.

Does it?

Jonathan Pollard, it is alleged, boasted openly that he was spying for Israeli intelligence, and no one lifted an eyebrow, let alone bothered to call the police.

Maybe nobody believed him. Then again maybe spying for a friendly power was regarded as legit, or at least quasi-legit. It wasn't, after all, as though he had bragged about taking two papers out of the vending machine.

A busy man, Mr. Pollard. He also was passing secrets to Pakistan and East Germany, he told the FBI, and his wife may have been working for the Chinese. All the Pollards seem to have been engaged in funny business except Dusty, the cat the Pollards toted along when they sought sanctuary at the Israeli Embassy — and you never can tell about cats.

Of course, we are knee deep in spies. Ennui does not translate readily into spy statistics. But it is reasonable to suppose that, in a nation where spying is regarded with a kind of bland numbness, many more Benedict Arnolds will emerge than Philip Nolans.

Yet we are even indifferent to indifference and the consequent espionage explosion.

"Intelligence reports," says *The New York Times*, "attribute the spate of new [espionage] arrests largely to coincidence and to Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the Soviet defector who re-

turned to Russia last month, though not before providing the names of 'scores' of agents and contacts around the world, a government official said."

American intelligence, in other words, credits kismet and a blabbermouth defector.

If this is so, we all owe a debt to Lady Luck and Comrade Yurchenko. Yet, if one can be pardoned for bringing it up, out of 13 Americans accused of spying in recent months, Mr. Yurchenko is credited with fingering only two — one of whom, Edward Howard, conveniently skipped town as the G-men were closing in.

My own feeling, for what it's worth, is that an ethically mobile segment of the population — not huge, but not small either — regards espionage as an acceptable vocation, sort of like running dope. Back from his glamor job at the CIA, the Yuppie spy jogs over to the Soviet Embassy and drops off the blueprints for the Zippo bomber, receiving in exchange the down payment on a chalet outside Vail.

How does a country deal with this kind of moral leprosy? By bawling out the secretary of the Navy for suggesting that spies be punished? That may work, but I doubt it.

Perhaps we should amend the Constitution instead, defining treason as not simply giving aid and comfort to the enemy, but also as selling national secrets. Put it to a vote, and the ayes would have it.

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